

Seaflower MPA Protects Marine Resources in the Caribbean

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In 2004, Columbia officially declared 29,500 square miles in the San Andres Archipelago, located in the southwest Caribbean, to be three multi-use “marine protected areas.” The Seaflower MPAs are the first Marine Protected Areas under Colombian law. In 2000, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) declared the archipelago to be a Biosphere Reserve called the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve. The recent MPA designation made it possible to implement additional resource protection measures, such as creating marine zones that limit or prohibit fishing and other consumptive activities.

The Seaflower MPA includes miles of fringing and barrier coral reefs, patch reefs, seagrass meadows, mangrove shoreline and deep water. This area is thought to be a source of fish and invertebrate larvae for other areas in the Caribbean, including the Florida Keys.

Mapping the area and developing a zoning plan for human activities within the MPA has been a collaborative process that has involved gathering input from fishers, local dive operators, and other stakeholders during the past five years. CORALINA, a regional government agency, was established to oversee the entire process and implement plans in the area. To oversee the day-to-day decisions, a co-management structure consisting of community commissions, scientific advisory committees and CORALINA officials has been established.

An International Advisory Board (IAB) was created as a Special Advisory Committee to CORALINA to give advice on management of the Seaflower MPA. At their fifth meeting in July 2005, CORALINA’s International Advisory Board released a report that stated, “Over the years, the Board has repeatedly been impressed by the dedication and accomplishments of the CORALINA MPA team. However, the achievements over the past nine months since the last IAB meeting in October 2004 are truly phenomenal.

The Board congratulates CORALINA in securing the legal declaration of the MPA, now the largest MPA in the Wider Caribbean region and the second largest in the hemisphere (after the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands).”

The July 2005 report continued by adding, “Completing the zoning plans for all sections of the new and expanded MPA, with such strong community support, is a fantastic and tremendously important achievement. Good work has of course been done on many other aspects as well, including the draft umbrella regulations, the Integrated Management Plan, and the various Action Plans, but securing community approval of the zoning is a tremendous feat and bodes well for the future of the MPA, the resources, and the community.”

Some of the most important resource recommendations included in the IAB report involve quickly marking the newly defined zones using buoys, signage and public outreach; limiting fishing in special use zones; and securing better protection of spawning aggregation sites by closing them seasonally to fishing, eventually closing them year-round.



Sanctuary mooring buoy specialists installed mooring buoys at some of the more popular diving sites in the San Andres Archipelago during a trip taken two years ago. (Photo: Hank Becker)



The land mass in the San Andres Archipelago consists of three major islands and seven atolls, with five located to the north of the major islands. (Photo: Hank Becker)

Note: This article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>.